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ABSTRACT

In the last 20 years, research on language has gone from an area that specialists in composition and rhetoric took quite seriously to one that specialists now pay little attention to. This shift can be accounted for because (1) some teachers appear to have given up on using any insights from linguistic analysis in their teaching of composition; (2) most composition teachers believe that linguistic work based in North America has little to do with improving students' writing skills; (3) those not studying grammars not originating in North America have not been careful in their use of terms associated with these grammars; (4) teachers are unwilling to risk taking any control over texts away from their students; (5) linguistic research has fallen on the losing side in the debate over quantitative or qualitative studies; and (6) it is the context that is focused on most among all the elements of a rhetorical situation. Researchers working with linguistics can attract a broader audience by doing more research that relates aspects of texts to contexts that produce those texts; helping composition teachers understand and move closer to remediating surface errors in students' essays; helping to characterize the stages students go through when they progress toward writing lexically dense prose; and doing work to help people understand the nature of dialects. (RS)

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Current Research on Language and Its Status with Composition Teachers

Caucus on Language, 1998 Convention of the Conference

on College Composition and Communication

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When Janet Gilbert (Delta College) wrote to me last fall with information about this year's Caucus on Language, she asked whether I would be willing to help the group start thinking about current research on language, research which she has been hoping for some time will lead composition teachers to a "grammar for composition."

I told her that I would be happy to talk briefly about current research on language, but I'm going to approach the subject from a perspective a bit different from what you might expect. I believe, though, that this perspective can lead us to think productively about research on language and about possible connections between that research and the teaching of composition.

What I invite you to think about with me is the matter of how important research on language seems to be to a great many of the people attending this convention and conventions like it. Specifically, I'd like to ask you to consider questions such as the following:

(1) How is research on language currently viewed by the majority of people in the fields of rhetoric and composition?

(2) Why has research on language come to be viewed in this way?

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And (3), if you, like me, believe that the dominant view of research on language within composition circles is not as it should be, what can we do to change it?

My own response to the question about how a great many people in composition and rhetoric currently view research on language is that I think these people do not pay nearly as much attention to such research as they should.

I am almost certain that people in composition and rhetoric today pay less attention to such research than people did when I came into the profession back in the late 70's. My evidence is informal, and it is dependent almost entirely on my memories, but consider a few of those memories. Back then, dozens of scholars all over the country were doing sentence-combining research; phrases like "t-units" and "syntactic maturity" were in the air. At conventions and during interviews I was nearly certain to hear about Halliday and Hasan's Cohesion in English and about research based on that book. At that time I was working on matters related to given and new information in sentences, and at most 4C's Conventions I had to take care not to miss presentations on these and related topics. I even remember scrambling up and down back stairwells in a hotel in New York City during the 4 C's convention to make sure I didn't miss any report on recent work on given and new information or on topical structure analysis.

Maybe my perceptions and memories are faulty, but it seems that the times have really changed. For example, although when I wrote these words I hadn't checked through this year's 4C's program in detail, it has been somewhat difficult

over the past few years to find notice in such programs of papers on grammar, style, discourse structure, and the like. Is there any other evidence that research on language is not now given top priority by specialists in rhetoric and composition? Let me cite two additional bits of information.

First, this past summer I received a mailing from one of the editors of Written Communication. With this mailing he alerted reviewers for the journal that the editorial office was not being overwhelmed by submissions on written language, and he asked us for help in encouraging people to embark on such research projects and to submit reports based on them to Written Communication.

Second, it is instructive to examine the topics in Irwin Weiser's entry about linguistics in the 1996 Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition. Among the subjects he deals with in connection with composition are sentence-combining, generative rhetoric, tagmemics and invention, cohesion and coherence, and topical structure analysis--all of which I associate more closely with the years when I joined the profession than I do with recent years.

Furthermore, if you examine the dates of the eighteen works included on his list of resources, you will find that one work comes from the 1950's, ten come from the 1960's, four come from the 1970's, and three come from the 1980's. The 1990's are represented by no works at all.

I don't want to overstate the case, since it is not true that people working in composition and rhetoric have no works reporting research on language to work with. In addition to journal articles, we have books like Victor Raskin and Irv

Weiser's Language and Writing: Applications of Linguistics to Rhetoric and Composition (1987), Nigel Fabb et al.'s The Linguistics of Writing (1987), and Colleen Donnelly's Linguistics for Writing (1994), to mention three. And Ellen Barton and Gail Stygall are working on an edited volume tentatively entitled Discourse Studies in Composition.

Still, it seems to me that in the last twenty years or so research on language has gone from an area that specialists in composition and rhetoric took quite seriously to one that such specialists now pay little attention to. How can we best account for this shift? Here are six of my stabs at answers.

First, it seems to me that some people in our field assume that the only kind of grammar is traditional grammar and that the only way to use it is to teach it as a system and hope that students will somehow connect the analysis of language to the production of it. Without wise and consistent attention to how the gap between analysis and production of language can be bridged, however, such efforts will probably not lead to significant growth in writing skill. When such growth fails to occur, many teachers seem to assume that it is hopeless to use any system of linguistic description to help students write more skillfully. And some teachers appear to give up on using any insights from linguistic analysis in their teaching of composition.

Second, it seems to me that many composition teachers who learned any grammar or grammars in their undergraduate or graduate training probably learned a grammar developed in North America. If they did, at some point or another they

probably read the developers of those grammars stressing points that have been and perhaps still are prevalent in North American linguistics--points to the effect that their grammars are concerned with people's abstract competence, not performance; that their grammars take an acontextual approach to language; that their grammars deal with speech, not writing; and that their grammars focus only on syntax. I suspect that when composition teachers encounter such stresses over and over, they come to believe them and conclude that much linguistic work based in North America can have little to do with helping students write more skillfully.

Third, it seems to me that those who have studied grammars not originating in North America, such as Australian, British, or Czech versions of functional grammar, have not been as careful in their use of terms associated with these grammars as they should have been. Probably all of us who have worked with such grammars should be more careful about how we do and do not define terms and about how those definitions relate to other ones that readers might encounter. We might also be wise to point out possible weaknesses within or rough edges on the definitions we use. With regard to sets of linguistic terms close to my heart, I can probably give you only the slightest suggestion about how much impatience I have heard composition teachers expressing about ever becoming clear about the meanings of theme and rheme or of given and new information.

Fourth, it seems to me that some composition teachers pay little attention to linguistic findings since they are unwilling to risk taking any control over texts away from the students who write them. I know that all composition teachers must be

exceedingly careful about wresting any significant control over texts away from students. But I also believe that research in linguistics and discourse analysis can provide powerful generalizations about how readers will respond to characteristics of sentences and texts. I think that students deserve to know about these generalizations, but at least some people who teach composition, on hearing people passing on generalizations about language--for example, generalizations about given and new information--become uncomfortable with what they see as taking some control over texts away from students. In a climate where such voices become stronger and stronger, many generalizations based on the study of language can become ever more suspect.

Fifth, I suspect that linguistic research has fallen on the losing side in the debate over quantitative or qualitative studies. In 1983, Robert Connors saw the field of composition as "tending strongly in the direction of scientific forms of inquiry . . . " (p. 1). And while he did not want to cut composition off from the kind of knowledge that scientific endeavor can offer, he argued that composition was not a science and could not become one in the foreseeable future. Since Connors wrote, it seems clear that the composition profession has distanced itself quite noticeably from kinds of research that might be described with words such as scientific, empirical, or even experimental. The field defines itself as more humanistic than scientific, and its currently preferred research modes are closer to the qualitative than the quantitative. And while all linguistic research is not quantitative or experimental or predictive, I'm sure that linguistic research in general seems

empirical to most compositionists and therefore not at the very heart of their concerns.

Finally, and probably most importantly, it seems to me that any current researchers who focus primarily on sentences or texts will not be the researchers most attended to in composition circles today. Why? Mainly because among all the elements or aspects of any rhetorical situation, the text is not the element focused on the most these days. What element or aspect is focused upon the most? It seems quite clear that it is the context--the cultural, social, political, economic and other factors that influence or perhaps even construct writers and readers as they negotiate meanings in texts. As we will see in a moment, I believe that linguists can contribute to knowledge about rhetorical contexts, but currently the contextual turn in composition has left many linguists and discourse analysts wondering whether their work will be read by many composition specialists or not.

Those are my six provisional explanations for what I have called the shift in composition research away from research grounded in or informed by linguistics. As our time goes on, I'll be eager to hear how you think my list of explanations ought to be amended. For now, however, I'd like to move on to four suggestions about what researchers working with linguistics can do to attract a broader audience among composition teachers and researchers.

My first suggestion is that we should do more of one kind of study that we are already quite good at. That is, we should do more work that relates aspects of texts to aspects of the contexts in which those texts are produced and received.

As I noted earlier, linguists and discourse analysts have already reported on a good number of studies relating texts and contexts. Several of these come almost immediately to mind. For instance, we have work relating syntactical patterns to the complexity of ideas as the field of spectroscopy within physics developed during this century. We have work connecting patterns of sentence subjects to patterns of knowledge-making in academic fields such as history, psychology, literary criticism, and anthropology. We have work relating uses of evidentials and text connectives to apparent assumptions about epistemology made by novice and professional writers of argumentative pieces. And we have work relating uses of text connectives by writers of Finnish and by writers of English to the Finnish and American systems of schooling and culture.

But there are many kinds of texts, contexts, and possible relationships between them that are waiting to be investigated. Work on these, I believe, will not only be interesting in and of itself but will also be compelling to people currently working in composition.

Second, I believe that linguists and discourse analysts can help composition teachers understand and perhaps move closer to remediating surface errors in students' essays. Now I know that the issue of how much attention to pay to such errors is debatable. Even among my twenty or so colleagues I can find teachers who consider surface errors merely a bit of noise and others who believe that such errors cost their producers the right to have their ideas taken with full seriousness. I tend to view surface errors as somewhat serious, in part because I've seen the prices

writers can pay for making them, and in part because I've had several students who have a history of making such errors and have had their self-images affected by reactions to those errors. So I am inclined to address surface errors with my writing students.

I also know, however, that there are many different views about causes for such errors--from causes based on performance constraints, through those based on idiosyncratic understandings of rules, to those based on kinds of interference between languages and dialects.

Still I've become intrigued by suggestions from Ellen Barton and some of her graduate students that some kinds of surface errors reveal associations between mismanaging clause structure and idea structure. If this proves to be correct, linguists are in an ideal position to investigate how syntax might interact with semantics to produce kinds of surface errors. This too, I think, would be information that composition teachers would find compelling.

Third, for the past several years I've been fascinated with Halliday's work on how unselfconscious speech can differ from formal writing. He suggests that such speech actually conveys different kinds of meanings and has different potentials for complexity from the meanings and potentials for complexity in formal writing.

I am not suggesting that what all composition teachers must always strive to do is move students from the grammar of informal orality to that of formal written prose. I am suggesting that many of our students end up facing the challenge of learning to write the kind of lexically dense prose that Halliday says is especially

characteristic of academic areas where the learning produced over many years is stored up in print and referred to repeatedly.

This suggestion raises several questions. Should many of our students be made to face this challenge? Or should we ask specialists in areas of much stored-up knowledge to try to write differently? If that seems like a remote possibility, we might ask what stages students go through when they make good progress toward being able to write lexically dense prose. I assume that they probably go through linguistic as well as cognitive stages. But as far as I know, composition teachers do not know a great deal about these stages. If linguists can help characterize these stages, I think that composition teachers would welcome the characterizations.

Finally, I'd like to focus your attention on some issues related to regional and social dialects. As the recent debate in the United States about Ebonics shows, linguists need to do a lot of work in our culture generally to help people understand the nature of dialects.

But what I'm more interested in at the moment involves nonstandard dialects and the teaching of composition. If composition teachers believe--as I do--that all of our students should have the chance to learn to write Standard Edited English, then those teachers will probably also have to admit that we know less than we should about how we should teach Standard Edited English to those whose first dialect is different or even markedly different from Standard Edited English. For example, do we know how big of a role in this learning process is played by motivation? If we agree that motivation plays a large role, do we agree on how to

increase it? Further, if we try to do as some scholars recommend and place the whole system of one dialect over against the system of another, what aspects of the systems should we first focus learners' attention on? And then what aspects should we move on to?

You can see where I'm heading: Most questions such as I've just listed can, I believe, profitably be investigated by linguists. And the fruits of those investigations should be of considerable interest to composition teachers.

I realize with some chagrin that I began with an estimate of the importance of research on language to composition teachers, moved through several stabs at explanations of that estimated importance, and concluded with suggestions for how linguists can make their work more compelling to composition teachers. An estimate, stabs at explanations, and several suggestions--so much uncertainty, even for one who has done some work on hedges! But surely you can help me move closer to certainty in one or more of these areas.

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